

Seeking Truth In Action

by Don Oberdorfer

The limousine from the Blue House, South Korea's equivalent of the White House, passed through the heavily guarded, high steel gates and proceeded onto the grounds that I had visited many times before on my way to see South Korean heads of state and other officials. This time, to my surprise, the car kept going past the presidential offices and up a winding hillside road lined with old, gnarled pines. At the top of the hill was the presidential residence, which is rarely used for greeting foreign visitors. I took off my shoes at the entryway and donned slippers, as is the custom in most Korean homes. Inside the spacious living room, sitting stoically in a chair beside a small sofa, was a man I had met many times in the past quarter-century under dramatically different circumstances. This time Kim Dae Jung, who at various times during his long political life had been denounced, kidnapped, imprisoned, sentenced to death, and exiled by South Korea's leaders, was the duly elected president of his country.

Kim came to his feet unsteadily—he suffers from hip joint arthritis as a result of a devastating traffic “accident” after his first presidential campaign, in 1971. Kim believes it was a disguised assassination attempt; if so, it was only the first of several such attempts by his political opponents. As president, he is protected from threats to his life and his privacy by all the panoply of government. In earlier days, he faced

實事求是

persistent harassment and worse. His house in Seoul was surrounded by platoons of government agents on nearby streets and rooftops who monitored and intimidated his visitors. On this day in March 1998, a little more than a month after his inauguration, South Korea was at the nadir of its most serious economic crisis since the Korean War; "a dark IMF tunnel," as he had told his people in a televised town meeting. Four months earlier, South Korea's amazingly rapid economic rise, the exemplar of "the East Asian miracle," had been suddenly interrupted by the loss of investor confidence and the abrupt flight of international capital. As the crisis leaped northward from Thailand, South Korea's currency lost 40 percent of its value and its stock market dropped 42 percent. The Seoul government was forced to go hat in hand to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for a \$57 billion bailout, accepting in return a stringent austerity program and an overhaul of its economic policies.

Amid this turmoil, to nearly everyone's surprise except his own, Kim Dae Jung was elected president by a narrow margin. Although Kim criticized the IMF at one point in his campaign, after the election he told South Koreans bluntly and boldly that there was no alternative to making the changes the IMF was advocating, and that such foreign intervention was designed to help, not hurt, the South Korean people. "I am hopeful because our people are highly educated," Kim told me, speaking effectively if hesitantly in the English he had learned while in exile in the United States during the early 1980s. While South Koreans had long rejected any significant role for foreigners in their economy, he continued, "it is very necessary for us to open the doors to outsiders. We must receive foreign investments—otherwise there is no good hope for us." From the

first days after his election in December 1997, even before taking office, Kim strenuously campaigned for this dramatic change in the mindset of his highly nationalistic countrymen, and for long-term investments in Korea by foreign firms and individuals. Previously, according to the World Bank, South Korea had been eighth out of 103 countries surveyed in gross domestic investment as a share of its economy, but only 91st out of 103 in terms of foreign direct investment.

Before he became president, Kim was a defender of the downtrodden and a critic of the workings of big business in South Korea. But he devoted most of his career to domestic politics, relations with North Korea, and international affairs. It was thus an irony of history that he came to power at a time when economic affairs were the central imperative for South Korea. His first year saw a whirlwind of legislative and administrative initiatives designed to put the economy back on a sustainable upward course and to create the beginnings of a social safety net. In South Korea, this program is called "DJnomics." Whether or not Kim's policies are the cause, most observers agree that the country is at the forefront of nations recovering from the Asian economic crisis.

Kim Dae Jung also came to power at a time when the half-century-old struggle with North Korea was in an especially complex and difficult stage. Since the collapse of its Soviet sponsor and ally, and with the growing dominance of markets over Marxism in China, North Korea has been in a steep decline of almost unprecedented scale for a reasonably industrialized state. U.S. officials estimate that economic output has plummeted by more than two-thirds in the past five years. North Korea is unable

> DON OBERDORFER is distinguished journalist in residence at Johns Hopkins University's Nitze School of Advanced International Studies. A former Washington Post correspondent, he is the author of several books, including *The Two Koreas* (1997). Copyright © 1999 by Don Oberdorfer.



Enthusiastic crowds greeted candidate Kim Dae Jung on the campaign trail in 1987 but he fell short of victory.

to feed its people. As many as two million of its 24 million inhabitants may have succumbed to starvation or starvation-related illnesses in the past several years. Yet despite some early hints to the contrary (and a surprising history of intermittent official dealings with Seoul dating back to 1972), the unbending North Korean regime has not responded to Kim's strenuous efforts to begin a high-level dialogue.

In our initial conversation shortly after his inauguration, Kim was optimistic that the antagonistic North would respond to his attempts to defuse tensions and promote North-South engagement. "I think there are discussions among the North Korean leadership about how to change their policies toward the South," he told me hopefully. When we met again more

than a year later, the North appeared to most observers to be as intractable as ever despite its growing domestic woes. Kim, however, professed not to be discouraged. "I didn't expect them to respond by expressing support" for his engagement policies, he said. Kim could also point to progress along other avenues. Since he had been president, some 3,300 South Koreans had traveled to the North on unofficial economic, cultural, religious, or other missions—more than in the previous nine years combined. Another 35,000 South Koreans had gone north as tourists. While all this falls short of an official relationship, Kim termed it "quite remarkable" and expressed hope that it would go further.

Because of his near martyrdom at the hands of earlier leaders and his long bouts of imprisonment or house arrest,

Kim has often been compared to Nelson Mandela of South Africa. There are notable parallels, especially in their willingness to forgive their former tormentors, but there are also important differences. Unlike Mandela, Kim is the representative of a disadvantaged region rather than a racial majority. Able to travel and study abroad during intermittent periods of exile or freedom, Kim is today the most internationally sophisticated president South Korea has ever known, and probably more sophisticated in the ways of the world than any other Asian leader.

Kim Dae Jung is the quintessential outsider in South Korean politics. "His life would make a great movie," says You Jong Kuen, a provincial governor and longtime Kim adviser. He was born on January 6, 1924, to a sharecropper on a small island in the Cholla region of southwest Korea, the poorest and most neglected area of the country. His parents were so poor that his birth was not registered for more than a year (which has created a minor controversy about his birth date). During the 1950–53 Korean War, he did not serve in the military but worked as a shipping executive in his native Cholla region. He also began an active career in the Democratic Party, which, under a variety of successive names and leaderships,

has been the main opposition party in South Korea. After two unsuccessful tries, he was elected to the National Assembly in 1961, and rose quickly within the opposition ranks.

Kim's big break came when he narrowly won the 1971 nomination of the New Democratic Party to oppose President Park Chung Hee, who had come to power in a military coup a decade earlier but was forced by U.S. pressure to submit his rule periodically to the voters. It was Kim's great triumph—and also his great misfortune—to run a dazzling populist campaign that came much closer (with 46 percent of the vote) to ousting Park than anyone had expected. From then on, Park and the various military-led regimes that followed considered Kim political enemy number one.

Kim's consistent advocacy of peaceful coexistence with the North during even the darkest days of the Cold War gave an opening to his opponents to tar him as procommunist or even, as in a July 1980 government indictment, "a dedicated communist" and "an extremely dangerous anti-state and anti-national insurrectionist." They also exploited his early association with leftists—which he had quickly abandoned—although it was minimal compared with the experience of President Park himself, who had led a communist cell at the Korean Military Academy before the Korean War and was saved from a death sentence only by the intervention of U.S. military officers who knew him. In 1980, a confidential U.S. embassy review of Kim's speeches and statements described his views as "less than radical." A cable to Washington, subsequently declassified under the Freedom of Information Act, summarized positions that have been remarkably consis-



On trial for his life in 1980, Kim attracted worldwide attention.

tent throughout Kim's political career—and, many would now say, ahead of their time. In foreign policy, Kim favored “an easing of North-South Korean tension,” a “de-emphasis of ideology, in favor of national concerns,” and “internal democratic reforms to strengthen the ROK's [Republic of Korea] foreign policy.” On the economy, the embassy reported, Kim's position was that “the ROK's economic development is not all that it is cracked up to be, and gives the greatest benefits to big businessmen and corrupt government officials. The ROK economy should have a firm agricultural base and be oriented toward light and medium industry.”

As the cable noted, restrictions on Kim had kept him out of circulation—and his views and activities out of the newspapers, except when he was being attacked—for most of the time since his 1971 presidential race. Thus, Roh Tae Woo, at the time an influential general and later an elected president, told me in 1980 that Kim was surely a communist. When I challenged his assertion, I learned that Roh, like most senior military officers of the time, had never even met Kim.

In October 1972, 18 months after the presidential race he nearly lost to Kim, President Park declared martial law, arrested his political competitors and opponents, jettisoned the existing constitution, and took the precaution of arranging for indirect election of the president in the future. Kim Dae Jung, who was out of the country at the time and (it was thought) outside the reach of the regime, began speaking out strongly against Park.

Ten months later, in the most spectacular assault against Kim—and the one that made him an international figure—he was kidnapped by the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA) from a Tokyo hotel and taken blindfolded and gagged aboard a secret police vessel. At one point, Kim's kidnappers put heavy weights on his arms and legs, and he was

convinced he was about to be thrown overboard. But suddenly the weights were removed. Kim was taken back to Seoul, where he was released blindfolded near his home. Some details of the kidnapping are still unclear, including whether Park was personally responsible, but there is circumstantial evidence that Kim lived because of strong representations by U.S. ambassador Philip Habib. Back home, Kim was permitted to speak to followers and journalists briefly and then placed under house arrest. His kidnappers were never formally identified or charged.

He was imprisoned for a year in 1975 for continuing to speak out and again in 1977 until late 1978, when he was placed under house arrest. Following Park's assassination by his own KCIA chief in 1979, the government granted Kim amnesty and briefly restored his civil rights. He was arrested again in mid-1980 during the rule of Chun Doo Hwan, another general, on trumped-up charges that he had staged an insurrection in Kwangju, the main city of his home Cholla region. This time he spent 60 days in a secret police interrogation basement, “never seeing sunlight,” he later wrote, “listening to the . . . sounds of torture, asked the same questions 20 to 30 times a day from morning to night.” Kim did not give in. This time, a court-martial sentenced him to death.

By now, Kim had become a prominent symbol of resistance to dictatorship in South Korea, with many admirers abroad. In their only known cooperative enterprise, the outgoing Carter administration and the incoming Reagan administration worked together to make sure that the death sentence was not carried out. As the result of a deal worked out by Richard Allen, President Ronald Reagan's first national security adviser, the sentence was commuted and, in return, President Chun became one of Reagan's first official guests at the White House, in early 1981. Kim remained in prison

nearly two more years before being sent into exile at the end of 1982. He returned to Korea in 1985.

The U.S. role in Kim's career and, more important, the larger drive for democracy in South Korea, is as complex as this series of events suggests. American leaders and diplomats always favored democracy in principle, but they permitted a series of military coups—and repressive domestic practices such as Kim's imprisonment—without much protest or interference. Seoul's authoritarian leaders also skillfully exploited the reasonable fear that a U.S. showdown with the South Korean regime could open the way for North Korean gains or even a North Korean invasion. The continuing presence of American troops (now numbering 37,000) to keep the peace on the peninsula did not strengthen U.S. political leverage but, at times, seemed to diminish it as security con-

cerns took precedence over democracy. However, at some key moments—such as when Kim faced death, or later, when President Reagan personally pressed the regime to permit popular election of the president in 1987—the United States did help advance the cause of democracy.

Kim returned to South Korea in 1985 strengthened by his years of adversity. His spells in prison or under house arrest had allowed him to read widely, and in exile he met many leaders in the United States, Japan, and Europe. The regime's kidnapping and death sentence had made him more widely known outside his country than any other citizen of South Korea, including its presidents.

He returned in the mid-1980s to a country with an enlarged and vocal middle class eager for political progress to match the country's dramatic economic achieve-

ments. The formula for success was export-led growth following the Japanese model, implemented by family-dominated economic conglomerates known as *chaebol*. (It is no coincidence that the term represents the Korean pronunciation of the characters for *zai-batsu*, the famous pre-World War II Japanese industrial combines.) While U.S. aid was essential in the first years after the Korean War, the subsequent combination of heavily subsidized domestic credit and government-directed objectives eventual-



Domestic reform meets resistance not only from closely linked business and political leaders but from many ordinary folk like these Daewoo Electronics Co. employees, who protested the firm's merger in 1998.

The Calculus of Reunification

(The two Koreas in 1995–96, the two Germanys in 1989)

	<u>South Korea</u>	<u>North Korea</u>	<u>West Germany</u>	<u>East Germany</u>
Population (millions)	44.9	23.9	62.1	16.6
GNP (billions of dollars)	451.7	22.3	1,207	96
Per-capita income (dollars)	10,067	957	19,283	5,840
Government outlays (billions of dollars)	97.1	19	547.7	61.8
(as % of GNP)	21.5	85	45.5	64.4
Defense spending (billions of dollars)	14.4	5.2	28.5	11.2
(as % of GNP)	3.2	23	2.4	11.6
Foreign trade (billions of dollars)	260.2	2.05	611.1	47
(as % of GNP)	57.6	9.2	50.6	49
Infant mortality (per 1,000 births)	10	26	7.4	7.5
Rural population (as % of total)	19	39	3.7	10.8
Bilateral trade (millions of dollars)	— 287 —		— 7,797 —	

The dream of reunification, though pushed further into the distance by economic crisis, is never far from the South Korean imagination. Some 10 million Koreans remain separated from family members as a result of the country's division; Seoul even maintains a Ministry for National Reunification. Last year, German diplomat Heinrich Kreft compared some measures of the divide separating the two Koreas with similar gauges of East and West German differences around the time the Berlin Wall fell. The results are not encouraging, Kreft reported in *Aussenpolitik* (No. 1, 1998). The material gaps between the two Koreas in 1995–96 were much wider (and are surely even wider today) than those that separated the two Germanys in 1989. The political differences are even greater. The two Germanys never fought each other in a war, to cite one obvious example, while the two Koreas did. The two Asian states have never gone a year since the end of that conflict without an armed clash of some kind. Germany's reunification, though presumably much easier to manage, remains even today a costly, painful process. The chief lesson Kreft thinks the South should learn from the German experience: if the North collapses, Seoul's first priorities should be to set up a separate administration above the 38th parallel and to seal the borders against an exodus from the North.

ly made South Korea an increasingly independent economic power of impressive size and diversity with an economic growth rate averaging nine percent annually over several decades. Confucian tradition and the various regimes' continuing strong emphasis on schooling produced a highly educated labor force, which shared in the economic gains to an important degree. Labor unions were suppressed, however, and antigovernment political activities sharply curtailed. As the political leader of the Cholla region, which benefited least from the general prosperity, Kim spoke out as openly and often as he could against inequities in the growing economy.

In 1987, South Korea took a decisive turn toward democracy when powerful public protests, and a nudge from Washington, forced President Chun to agree to a direct, popular election of the next president. Kim Dae Jung was ready and eager to run again—but so too were two competing political leaders also named Kim, a common clan name in Korea. South Koreans distinguished the “three Kims” by using their English language initials. “DJ” was Kim Dae Jung. His sometime colleague, sometime rival within the opposition party, Kim Young Sam, was known as “YS.” Conservative Kim Jong Pil, the founder of the KCIA and a prime mover in South Korea's military governments, was called “JP.” The fourth candidate, backed by Chun and all the money and power of the ruling government, was Roh Tae Woo, the former general.

It was clear from the first that if DJ and YS both ran, they would split the opposition vote and elect Roh. Both leaders told me in separate conversations in the summer of 1987 that they were determined not to do that, but in the end, each found the race irresistible. On election day, Roh was victorious, with 38 percent of the vote. Kim Young Sam garnered 28 percent, Kim Dae Jung 27 percent. Kim Jong Pil was a distant fourth. Many South Koreans held the two opposition leaders responsible for not getting together. By

the time of the next presidential election in 1992, President Roh had recruited former oppositionist Kim Young Sam to join his ruling party and become its standard-bearer. With government backing and strong support from his regional base in the southeast, YS was elected. Kim Dae Jung, defeated for the third time, announced his retirement from politics.

YS came in as a reformist, and one of his early measures dealing with the disclosure of financial holdings led to the revelation that former president Chun had collected \$1.8 billion in political slush funds from industrialists, and that he left office with \$265 million in hidden private accounts. Former president Roh had accumulated a \$625 million slush fund, and took \$227 million with him when he left office. These stupefying revelations led to the conviction and imprisonment of the two former presidents on corruption charges, an earthquake in the notoriously corrupt world of South Korean politics. Several prominent business leaders, including the heads of the Daewoo and Samsung conglomerates, were also convicted, but the tycoons were given suspended sentences or acquitted on appeal and did not serve time. Kim Dae Jung was caught up as well, announcing shortly after the scandal broke that he had received a political “gift” of about \$2.5 million from Roh during the 1992 presidential race. He claimed that Kim Young Sam had received much more. Neither Kim was charged.

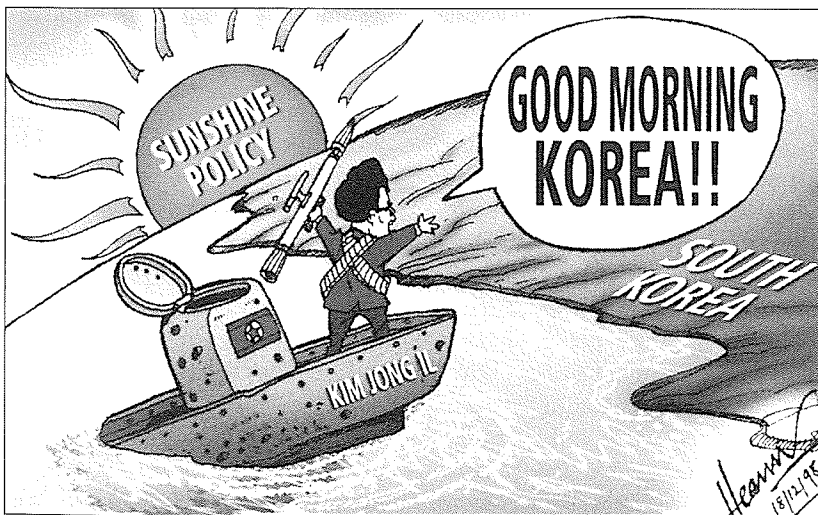
Halfway through the term of his old colleague and rival, Kim Dae Jung's long-unsatisfied ambition to be president reasserted itself. The old war-horse announced “with a deep sense of agony and shame” that he was abandoning his pledge to retire from politics. This time this bold and canny politician determined that if he could not win the presidency alone, he would do so in a coalition. He forged an unlikely partnership with Kim Jong Pil, founder of the KCIA that had once tormented him,

promising to make JP his prime minister and to shift to a parliamentary-based system of government midway through his presidential term. On election day in December 1997, DJ narrowly triumphed, with just over 40 percent of the vote, thanks to strong support in his home region, crucial help from JP's regional following, and the presence of a splinter candidate who split the ruling party vote. Another factor aiding DJ was the sudden collapse of the South Korean economy a month before the election, which turned many voters against the established order and increased the public's appetite for dramatic change.

Partly because the economic crisis makes rapid unification with North Korea less practical and less attractive than before, Kim's more moderate ideas about engaging the North have won wide (if not deep) public support. He declared in his inaugural address that "we do not have any intention to undermine or absorb North Korea," which is a path-breaking statement for a South Korean head of state. Moreover, he pledged to "actively pursue reconciliation and cooperation between the South and the North," an engagement drive that he has consistently pursued and which has

been given the name of "sunshine policy." Kim also assured his countrymen that "we will never tolerate armed provocation of any kind." In fact, however, he did minimize, if not tolerate, an attempted submarine incursion by North Korean agents.

As a key part of his engagement policy, Kim has sought to separate politics from business, permitting South Korean businessmen to pursue deals with the North with a minimum of interference or official oversight. A state visit to Washington in June 1998 gave Kim the occasion to ask President Bill Clinton to back this policy by reducing some of the myriad U.S. economic sanctions against the Pyongyang regime. Clinton was preparing to do so when the *New York Times* broke the explosive story that U.S. intelligence believed that North Korea was seeking to create a clandestine underground nuclear weapons facility, in violation of the 1994 agreement that had ended a crisis over the discovery of a North Korean nuclear effort only a few years earlier. After some initial reluctance, Kim's administration backed the U.S. demand for inspection of the suspected underground site. An accord last March, essentially trading U.S. food aid for access, appears to have averted a new crisis.



More open to negotiation with the North than any other South Korean leader, Kim Dae Jung has so far been rewarded with little but belligerence.

The biggest achievement of Kim's engagement policy so far is North Korea's October 1998 agreement to permit Hyundai, Seoul's largest *chaebol*, to bring South Korean tourists aboard cruise ships to Mount Kumgang, a peak famed for its rugged beauty just north of the demilitarized zone. To arrange these visits, Hyundai agreed to pay North Korea \$150 million over the first six months, and more later. The deal is not purely a business proposition but reflects the strong emotional ties that Hyundai founder Chung Ju-yung, like many other South Koreans, still feels to the "other half" of his country. The deal was personally endorsed in a rare public appearance by Kim Jong Il, the reclusive North Korean leader. If Hyundai has its way, this will be just the beginning of a much more impressive set of economic ties, including the creation of a light industrial zone on North Korea's west coast where 200,000 North Korean workers would labor under South Korean supervision to produce textiles, footwear, and other export goods that the South, because of its high labor costs, now finds difficult to produce at competitive prices.

After being the most prominent and most persecuted dissident in South Korean public life for a generation, Kim Dae Jung is finally in a position to put his ideas into practice. But he has won power amid economic troubles that neither he nor most other South Koreans ever expected. Although the core elements of the economy are recovering, unemployment, which climbed to about two million before leveling off recently, remains very high by South Korean standards. Kim has appealed to labor and the disadvantaged to be patient, an admonition that probably would not have been accepted as well if it came from any other South Korean political leader. At the same time, he has been sometimes urging, sometimes demanding, that the *chaebol* reform and reorganize to make themselves more competitive and less dependent on massive and often dubious borrowings. He

has tried, for example, to force them to adopt internationally accepted "transparent" accounting procedures and to reshape themselves into focused enterprises, shedding some of their far-flung and often competing businesses.

Even as he grapples with the economic crisis, Kim is also trying to pursue his "sunshine" policy, which requires winning support of the United States, Japan, China, and Russia, all of which have major security interests in the Korean peninsula. Seeking to do all these things at once makes his the most difficult job, I think, of any South Korean president since Syngman Rhee, the founding president who saw the country through the Korean War.

Approaching the end of the first 18 months of his single five-year term this summer, Kim is a man in a hurry. Opposition elements of the former ruling party have become increasingly vocal critics of his every move. Labor and the unemployed are increasingly unhappy. Kim faces national parliamentary elections early next year that will set the course for his dealings with the National Assembly. He must also find a way to accommodate or repudiate the bargain he made with his coalition partners to change from a presidential system to a parliamentary system by midway through his term, the summer of 2001. Today, after a long and difficult life in politics and amid the trials of the current economic crisis, Kim Dae Jung often appears in private to be a very tired man.

In 1987, on one of my many visits to his home, he presented me with a work of calligraphy he himself had created with brush and ink on rice paper. The Chinese characters he chose mean "Seek truth in action." This was a credo of the advocates of modernization in turn-of-the-century China and Korea, and Kim has made it his own. It is an appropriate motto for a man of persistent, if often frustrated, action as he guides his country into the next millennium.